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ABSTRACT

The Futures in Quality Education Workforce (FQEW) program provides current teacher aides and school secretaries an alternative pathway to becoming credentialed teachers. Offered by the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College in conjunction with 12 local school districts, the program offers alternative coursework and alternative scheduling of courses. Paraprofessionals currently working in the classroom may count their current work experience as observation hours, and student teaching is waived for them, thereby accelerating program completion. Interviews with 26 primarily Mexican American paraprofessionals participating in the program and two focus groups indicate that the FQEW project must continue to ensure that an adequate number of courses are available at times convenient to students (evening and summer). Students must receive appropriate counseling so they do not feel lost or discouraged and they clearly understand the steps needed to complete the program. Support must continue in the area of the student teaching waiver and allowing field-based observation hours in the current job setting. Program staff must continue to monitor students desiring to enter the teacher education program and provide assistance and support for passing the Texas Academic Skills Program test, which is necessary to meet admission requirements. The project must continue to address the financial, academic, and social barriers encountered by paraprofessionals working toward becoming credentialed teachers. (Contains 26 references) (TD)

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FUTURES IN QUALITY EDUCATION: AN ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHWAY FROM PARAPROFESSIONAL TO TEACHER

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Futures in Quality Education: An Alternative Career Pathway from Paraprofessional to Teacher

This paper presents the first year's findings of a two-year grant project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor in conjunction with the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. Futures in Quality Education Workforce is an alternative for educational paraprofessionals to become certified teachers.

The literature review discusses the significance of the topic and a rationale for additional research in the alternative career pathway programs to increase the number of teachers. A description of the program and its findings to date follow.

The paper concludes with the results of a qualitative analysis of program participant responses to factors that enhance or inhibit entrance, persistence, and completion of an accelerated teacher preparation program.

We hope that the findings of our study will serve to improve our program in its second year as well as present implications for future alternative career pathway programs designed to develop paraprofessionals as certified teachers.

Part One: Significance of the Topic

The topic of teacher shortages is a high priority nationwide. Of particular concern to most school districts is the need for qualified teachers in the areas of special education, bilingual education, and secondary math and science. As a result, many districts are placing concerted efforts into innovative teacher recruitment, induction, and retention programs. States are looking at alternatives to traditional teacher programs such as career exploration projects at the precollegiate level; urban education service corps; state loan forgiveness programs; midcareer transition programs such as the armed services Troop to Teachers Program; Teach for America; short term alternative training programs and national public service campaigns (Finn & Madigan 2001; Haselkorn & Fideler 1996; Tell, 2001).

The teacher shortage is not projected to go away anytime soon. Current statistics indicate that the nation's public school teaching force will grow from 2.7 million in 1998 to more than 3 million by 2008 (NCES in Hardy, 1998). Estimates on the number of teachers America will need to hire range from 2 to 2.5 million teachers over the next ten years because of growing school enrollments and rising teacher retirements (Haselkorn; Fideler,

1996; National Center of Educational Statistics 1996, 1998; Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. 1996; Reid, 2001).

One fourth of all teachers nationwide are at least 50 years old and the median age of teachers nationwide is 44. By 2008, total public and private school enrollment is expected to rise to 54.3%, an increase of about 6.6% from 1996 (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. 1996). Additionally, it must be noted the attrition rate of beginning teachers continues to be high with 30% leaving the profession within five years and forty percent of newly qualified teachers aren't employed in the profession a year after they graduate (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hardy, 1998).

The demographics of America's student population are changing. Minority children make up about 40% of the nation's elementary and secondary enrollment (Reid, 2001). In states like Texas, minority students have been the majority student population since 1991 (Garcia, 1991). The demographics of America's teaching force has not changed to match the changing student demographics. According to NEA, the traditional teaching pool graduates are from Colleges of Education composed to predominantly white women who generally expect to teach close to home (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1996). Only 13.5% of

teachers are members of racial and ethnic minorities (Reid, 2001). Other figures cite the number of ethnic teachers nationally at about 9% with that number expected to drop to less that 5% in the coming years (Jorgenson, 2001). High need immigration states such as California, Texas, and New York have a great need for bilingual minority teachers to serve the needs of their language minority students (Vail 1998).

Studies suggest that educational paraprofessionals are an untapped pool of future teachers that can serve not only to alleviate shortage but also diversify the teacher workforce (Darling Hammond, 2001; Genzuk, 1997; Hardy, 1998; Harper, 1994; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Jorgenson, 2001; McNulty, 2000; Pickett, 1995; Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1996; Vail 1998; Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Vail, 1998). A recent study of the 50 chief state school officers conducted by the National Resource Center for paraprofessionals in education indicated that there are more than 400,000 paraprofessionals working in general, compensatory and special education programs administered by schools nationwide (AACTE, 1999; Pickett, 199_). The U.S. Department of Labor cites teacher assistants as holding 1.2 million jobs in 1998 (U.S. DOL 2000-2001).

Para educators are cited as promising source of teachers for critical shortage areas such as bilingual and special education as many already work in these areas (Fern, 1998; Genzuk, et al., 1994; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Ponessa 1996). Many of the paraprofessionals work in states on the front lines of enrollment and demographic changes such as California, New York, Illinois, Texas, and Florida. They have significant teaching responsibility, i.e., in California two out of every five adults providing bilingual instruction are bilingual aides (Haselkorn, 1996).

Research suggests numerous benefits of developing paraprofessionals into teachers. Benefits include the fact that paraprofessionals are older and more experienced in working with children; have strong roots and live in the community in which they work and as a result have more staying power; speak the students' language and are a sorely needed language resource; understand the culture and serve as a link to the community; and know teacher's work (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Genzuk, 1997; Hale, 1998; Hentschke, 1995).

Policy recommendations have been developed that suggest that college pathways that prepare paraprofessionals for certification be developed. Such career pathway programs have

been identified as having high numbers of participants completing the program and entering teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Recruiting New Teachers, 1996). College pathways can raise skill levels and earning potential of the paraprofessional that becomes a teacher (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Currently, the median hourly earnings of teacher assistants wage as reported by the U.S. Department of Labor was $7.61 (DOL 2000-2001). Thus, a significant life change exists for participants.

An additional benefit of looking to paraprofessionals as a potential teaching pool is the fact that a large number of paraprofessionals want to be teachers. In Los Angeles, 52% of the paraprofessionals wanted to become teachers. After working as a paraeducator for an average of five years, this percentage rose to 75% (Genzuk, 1997).

Over 150 para educator to teacher programs—college pathways are identified in the literature as existing nationwide in approximately 30 states (AACTE, 1999; Haselkorn& Fideler 1996). Typical support features of such programs include regular university coursework; field based learning; summer and weekend courses; credit for life experiences; enhanced mentorship and advisement; cohort grouping; flexible scheduling and financial

assistance (Dandy 1997, 1998; Genzuk& Baca 1998; Genzuk 1997; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Villegas & Clewell 1998).

Of special interest to the Futures in Quality Education project was the research done by the Latino Teacher Project (LTP) in southern California. The primary objective of the LTP project was to increase the number of Latinas(os) in the teaching profession, especially bilingual education. The project was based on the belief that Latino paraeducators have the potential to become ideal teachers of language minority children because many of them are from the same ethnic minority communities as their students and are familiar with the children's cultural experiences as well as bringing personal insight into learning English as a second language.

The LTP project concluded that to effectively recruit Latino paraprofessionals into teacher education programs and to retain them through graduation and certification, programs must be designed to meet their needs. Findings of the project concluded that successful career pathways could be enhanced through attention to four areas: financial, social, academic, and external communities. Paraprofessionals needed to have access to grants, scholarships, and financial aid. Additionally, provisions needed to

be made for programs and events for sensitizing the paraprofessional's entire support community to the academic and social pressures they may encounter from the family, university, faculty, school site personnel and other external communities. Participants need academic enrichment through counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and extended programs that expanded the academic timeframe to achieve certification. Finally there was a need for a nurturing and supportive work environment that mediates the career pathway into teaching including direct mentoring (Genzuk & Baca 1998; Genzuk 1997; Genzuk, et al. 1994).

Research suggests that few joint efforts exist among IHEs, LEAs, SDEs, and professional/employee organizations to develop undergraduate and graduate programs that will attract and support paraprofessionals in their effort to become teachers (Pickett, 1995). Therefore, the Futures in Quality Education program is an additional effort to add to the literature on projects that incorporate joint efforts to increase the number of teachers from the para professional pool, especially teachers of color and teachers who serve language minority children.

Part Two: Futures in Quality Education Workforce Program Description

Program Overview. The Futures in Quality Education Workforce program is a two-year grant project funded by the Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, to work in conjunction with the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College and twelve local school districts to provide current teacher aides and school secretaries an alternative pathway to become credentialed teachers.

The primary strategy of the program is to provide support and assistance, financially and academically to paraprofessionals in order to enroll and complete the teacher education program with the goal of becoming successful credentialed teachers. The program provides participants with financial and academic support. The majority of participants are Hispanic and will serve to meet the needs of Language Minority students (bilingual) in South Texas as well as assist in diversifying America's teaching to mirror the increasing number of minority students in America's public schools.

Research supports the identification of paraprofessionals as a potential pool of teachers. They are especially promising as they

live in their communities and will continue to serve them once they become credentialed teachers.

Program Context. The U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration awarded the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College $1,000,000 on June 28, 2000, to implement the Futures in Quality Education Workforce (FQEW) Project, an incumbent worker proposal. The grant award would be in effect for two years June 2000–June 2002. The School of Education at UTB/TSC would be responsible for overseeing the grant and hiring the personnel to implement all aspects of the grant.

The FQEW project was proposed as a teacher certification model program for incumbent teacher assistants and other school personnel. The project was proposed as a response to a critical need for certified teachers in the UTB/TSC service area. In the 1999-2000 school year, as many as 350 uncertified teachers were hired to staff as many as 350 classrooms. Brownsville Independent School District personnel department reported seventy-nine vacancies on the first day of school during the 2001-2002 school year (Gavito, August 22, 2001). Twenty-three of the vacancies were in critical shortage areas, mathematics and science.

Program Development. The FQEW project grant states, "The goal of the FQEW project is to prepare incumbent workers, teacher assistants to meet the requirements for teacher certification. Approximately 1,800 teacher assistants could assume professional teaching positions if they completed advanced training. These workers would have increased employment opportunities given the critical teacher shortage in the area, increased earnings, and increased opportunities for further professional development advancement. Their progress toward professional advancement is limited in that they cannot complete certification requirements since they work full-time and few courses are offered at convenient times (DOL Grant AN-10813-00-60)."

The UTB/TSC hired and assigned six staff members to work on the grant: project director, project coordinator, two field based specialists, accounting clerk, and five computer support personnel, when needed. The FQEW staff was charged with the responsibility to design and deliver an alternative career pathway toward teacher certification for incumbent teacher assistants and school secretaries.

The initial task of the project centered on raising the career awareness of paraprofessionals and school secretaries to the

possibility of becoming an educator and to identify the number of paraprofessionals and school secretaries with high interest in becoming teachers.

The primary method of recruitment of program participants was to conduct presentations directly at their campus. The project staff also sought to enlist the support of school administrators, principals and superintendents. An advisory committee reviewed the recruitment materials and methods. The visits to school campuses were conducted during the fall 2000 and spring 2001. Recruitment efforts ceased by middle March.

As a result of recruitment efforts, 447 potential program participants were identified. 281 potential participants (63%) indicated a high interest in becoming a teacher followed by 117 (26%) who indicated a moderate interest in becoming a teacher. Thus, 89% of the paraprofessionals and school secretaries surveyed had a high or moderate interest in becoming a teacher. (1999-2000 School District Paraprofessional Need Assessment for Teacher Aides–Appendix A)

Program Design. While the participants were being identified, the project staff identified four objectives. They are as follows:

1. Design a model delivery system of teacher certification coursework to be offered in the evening, on weekends, and/or via distance learning.
2. Obtain internal and external approval of the new delivery model.
3. Enroll first cohort of FQEW participants with implementation of new program in the fall 2000 semester.
4. Two hundred incumbent teacher assistants and school secretaries will complete teacher certification by August 31, 2002. This was later revised to 60 due to delayed funding.

The grant also specified that two components be addressed in the program design. These two components were: Curriculum, Instructional Design, and Instructional Delivery (CID/ID) and Student Support Services (SSS).

Therefore to address the objectives and components identified in the grant, the FQEW staff identified a delivery model entitled the Educational Aide Cohort Course Sequence and Intervention Matrix (See Appendix B.)

The model was a result of the staff's desire to clearly identify participants at a point that they could effectively intervene to address their needs. Eventually nine participant levels were identified. They include:

- Level 1: Prospects
- Level 2: Pre Education Candidate I

- Level 3: Pre Education Candidate II
- Level 4: Teacher Education Candidate
- Level 5: Teacher Education Intern I
- Level 6: Teacher Education Intern II
- Level 7: Teacher Education Graduate
- Level 8: Certified Teacher
- Level 9: Induction Year

The strength of the model is that all 447 participants are assigned to a specific level. Specific courses and interventions needed for this level are then identified to meet their needs and apply specific interventions.

Currently, the grant is designed to fund support for those participants at levels 4-9, initial entry into teacher education through induction year. Forty-seven participants are enrolled at levels 4-9. A significant need exists for additional services to target those candidates in levels 1-3. Thus, a possibility of expanding the scope of work of the grant to address levels 1-3 is currently under consideration.

Targeted Project Participants. The intent of the FQEW grant project is to support current incumbent workers—paraprofessionals and secretaries in becoming fully credentialed and successful teachers. To date, 47 participants are currently

enrolled in the teacher education program (or recently graduated), which corresponds to levels 4-9 of the delivery model discussed above. The project's goal is to graduate 60 teachers in two years. Thus we have met 83% of our targeted goal.

A survey was conducted of 447 potential participants identified through recruitment trips. Surveys were administered during visits to Rio Hondo, Brownsville, San Benito, Raymondville, Santa Rosa, Lyford, Port Isabel, and Santa Maria school districts. The surveys revealed that 89% indicated a high or moderate interest in becoming a teacher. Of the 83% female and 17% male participants returning surveys, 62% were 33 years of age or older. 93% of the participants were Hispanic.

Consortium Structure/Participating Districts. Twelve school districts are listed as cooperative partners in the grant, these include, Brownsville, Harlingen, La Feria, La Sara, Los Fresnos, Lyford, Raymondville, Rio Hondo, San Benito, Santa Maria, San Perlita, and Santa Rosa. Of the twelve districts listed as cooperative partners, seven have paraprofessionals or secretaries enrolled and taking courses in the School of Education (Brownsville, Harlingen, La Feria, Los Fresnos, Lyford, Port Isabel, and San Benito).

Components of Support. The FQEW project has two levels of component support. Component One addresses academic support and Component Two addresses support services for students. Financial support is identified separately. Component One—Curriculum, Instructional Design, and Instructional Delivery (CID/ID). Within Component One, Curriculum, Instructional Design, and Instructional Delivery, support to FQEW participants is given in two areas; that of alternative coursework and the alternative scheduling of courses. The coursework addressed is the professional development course sequence in the School of Education. Courses within this section are as follows:

EDCI 4301	Foundations of Education in a Multicultural Society
EDCI 4302	Educational Psychology in the Elementary School
EDSC 4303	Understanding Learners and the Learning Environment (secondary)
EDCI 4305	Instructional Planning and Curriculum Development
EDCI 4306	Instructional Methodology and Classroom Management
EDSC 4374	The Secondary Curriculum
EDCI 4309	Content Area Methodologies
EDSC 4375	Methods and Techniques of Teaching in the Secondary School

Paraprofessionals currently working in the classroom are not required to conduct outside observation to fulfill the field based observation requirements for their courses. Rather paraprofessionals are allowed to count their current work experience as observation hours. Additionally, student teaching is waived for FQEW participants thereby accelerating their completion of the program by one semester. Field based specialists (FQEW university staff) visit paraprofessionals at their work setting to grant credit for their work experience and write the letter of eligibility normally obtained through successful student teaching.

The field-based specialists have provided an alternative scheduling of course offerings for participants through such avenues as a three-week mini-session and offering summer field based courses normally available only during the fall or spring semester. Additionally, efforts are currently underway to offer courses offsite at the paraprofessional's home campuses. Thus, allowing greater accessibility to courses.

An important aspect of the grant was Component Two—Student Support Services. Three areas of student support services have been provided to FQEW participants: Directive Counseling,

Orientation, and Workshops. The project assistant has been a critical aspect of Component Two by providing directive counseling and orientation to the university and the School of Education for project participants. Services available to participants include review and analysis of transcript, assistance and orientation on admission to the university, aid in enrollment of courses, answering questions regarding financial aid, issuing tuition reimbursement checks, and answering certification questions. The project assistant is the only point of contact needed to solve and assist with any problems.

Enrichment support has been provided to program participants through Texas Academic Skills Program workshops. The TASP review is necessary to meet admissions requirements to the School of Education and to the university. Workshops to assist students in passing the state licensure exam are also offered.

Financial Assistance. The U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration awarded the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College $1,000,000 on June 28, 2000 to initiate the Futures in Quality Education Project, an incumbent worker proposal. The grant award would be in effect for two years June 2000–June 2002.

Financial assistance is provided to all program participants regardless of other state or local assistance that they receive. Paraprofessionals may also qualify for assistance with tuition through the Texas certified educational aide exemption program. Many of our student participate in this program as well receive tuition reimbursement from the FQEW project. Tuition reimbursement is not only limited to courses in the professional development sequence, but rather to all college coursework leading toward certification. Academic expenses such as books, supplies, and academic course or exam reviews are also provided.

Part Three – Program Participant Responses and Analysis

Part three of the paper will focus on the results of a study done on the paraprofessionals participating in the FQEW project. The purpose of the study was to assess paraprofessional's responses. It is hoped that policy recommendations would emerge from the study to support year two of the project.

The literature contains numerous program descriptions and findings of para educator to teacher programs. The FQEW staff was interested in the comparison of our findings to that of the literature. Were the needs of our participants similar or different

from findings in the literature? The early analysis of our data is presented here.

To date, we conducted structured open-ended interviews with 17 randomly selected program participants. Two focus groups were conducted as well as 9 individual interviews. Interviews were conducted by university staff—one FQEW field based specialist and one School of Education professor. Six research questions are guiding the study:

1. What are the barriers to fulfilling a teaching degree as perceived by educational aides?
2. To what extent do family, culture, and the university enhance or inhibit an educational aide's decision to enter a university teacher preparation program?
3. What obstacles have you encountered at the university that have kept you from entering the university teacher preparation program?
4. What university obstacles have kept you from completing the university teacher preparation program?
5. What are the benefits of being an educational aide in an accelerated (rush teacher certification in a shorter amount of time) teacher preparation program?
6. Tell me how the experience you gained as an educational aide has helped you in the university teacher preparation program.

Preliminary Findings:

The following section will discuss the preliminary findings that can be ascertained from the interviews conducted. Participant

interviews were transcribed and analyzed so that categories and patterns began to emerge and shape the data.

Barriers

Our research questions focused on identifying the overall barriers that participants perceived as impeding their career path to becoming a certified teacher. Eight barriers were identified by the participants interviewed.

- Course Scheduling
- Curriculum –fulfilling requirements for field based observation hours
- Fulfilling family responsibilities and going to school
- Need for more access to university advising and clarity in advising
- Fulfilling work and school responsibilities
- Money (tuition assistance and transportation costs)
- Wasted Time

Research questions 2-4 sought to identify the barriers/inhibitors encountered at various points in the career pathway to becoming a certified teacher. These points were: the time a decision was made to enroll; barriers to actual enrollment in the teacher preparation program; and barriers to the completion of the teacher preparation program.

Three university inhibitors were identified by participants that affected their decision to enroll.

- Course scheduling
- Curriculum: fulfilling requirements for field based observation hours
- Need for more access to university advising and clarity in advising

Participants identified five entrance barriers to the teacher preparation program.

- Course scheduling
- Curriculum: fulfilling student teaching requirements
- Need for more access to university advising and clarity in advising
- Meeting entrance requirements: GPA and admissions testing–TASP
- Money

Five barriers to completion of the teacher preparation program were identified.

- Course scheduling
- Curriculum: fulfilling student teaching requirements
- Money
- Degree Plan changes
- Fear of failure in content area classes

Of the eight barriers noted four themes were identified by the participants as creating the greatest obstacle to their goal of becoming a teacher. These barriers were course scheduling,

curriculum, lack of advising and money. Course scheduling included issues such as lack of courses available at night and during the summer for paraprofessionals. Participants expressed frustration at the difficulty in enrolling in much needed courses and having to wait an entire semester or two until a course was once again available. Advising was described as another area of great frustration by participants. Paraprofessionals cited difficulty in being seen by an advisor as well as a complete sense of being lost in terms of what was needed in completing the course requirements towards becoming a teacher. Additionally, some participants spoke of fear that they may not be taking the correct courses and as a result would not reach their goal of becoming a teacher. The theme of money came up in connection with the continued need for tuition assistance and the fact that as paraprofessionals they were not in a position to quit work and pursue their teaching degree full time. Students also spoke of the need for curriculum modification. They also spoke of the need for student teaching to be waived as they could not quit work to complete student teaching and the need for observation requirements in field course to be modified as they often could not leave work to fulfill such requirements.

Benefits of the FQEW Program for Participants:

Participants identified the benefits of being a part of the FQEW project as the following: acceleration of course completion; availability of an advisor and someone to listen; and assistance with the waiver of student teacher requirements. Participants were pleased to have an opportunity to take course that were normally not offered in the summer or during mini sessions to accelerate their graduation rate. Additionally, participants felt relieved that someone was serving as their university contact to listen to them and assist in enrollment procedures with classes and to waive their student teaching.

Some participants felt that the FQEW program had not adequately addressed the issue of course enrollment barriers. Removing barriers to course enrollment is an area in need of further revision and continued assistance for program participants. FQEW staff has noted this as a problematic program area due to the university requirement that a minimum of 15 students must be enrolled in order to offer a course need.

Typical types of assistance available to support paraprofessionals on their journey to becoming teachers is identified in the literature as regular university coursework; field

based learning; summer and weekend courses; credit for life experiences; enhanced mentorship and advisement; cohort grouping; flexible scheduling and financial assistance (Dandy 1997, 1998; Genzuk & Baca 1998; Genzuk 1997; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Villegas & Clewell 1998). Assistance areas were further categorized by Genzuk as areas that if mediated would lead to success for paraprofessionals in the alternative career pathway. These four areas were financial, social, academic, and support from external communities (Genzuk, et al. 1994, Genzuk 1997).

Barriers identified by FQEW participants were similar to those identified by the literature as needing to be mediated/assisted in order for paraprofessionals to reach their goal of becoming a certified teacher. The FQEW research findings are consistent with the paraprofessional needs identified in the literature and the types of typical assistance available from alternative career pathway programs. It appears that the benefits of being a participant in the FQEW program address or mediate the top concerns cited by participants—course availability, curriculum modification, advising, and money. Although, money was not identified as a benefit all participants receive reimbursement for tuition and books regardless of other financial aid received. Therefore, money

although not cited as a benefit is indeed a benefit for all program participants.

Family/Cultural Enhancers and Inhibiters:

FQEW participants were asked to identify the extent to which family and culture enhanced or inhibited their decision to enter a teacher preparation program. Participants identified family and culture as either an enhancer or as an inhibitor.

Those participants that identified family as an inhibiter did not separate family from their discussions of culture. Family was viewed as intertwined in the discussion of culture. Rather, participants addressed the fact that their culture had certain expectations for women and their families and this made their decision to go to school more difficult. These participants stated that in their culture family came first. Participants cited examples such as a mother not liking her daughter to take time away from the family; and the expectation by males to stay home and place the needs of the family (cooking, cleaning and caring for children) first.

Numerous participants identified their family as an enhancement to their school enrollment because they were the first

members of their family to enroll in college. Additionally, their mothers provided assistance in caring for their children. Culture was identified as having no negative impact on efforts to complete school and instead served as a driving force to prove that school is not put aside but regarded as important in the Mexican culture.

Overall participants did identify as a barrier the issue of fulfilling work and family responsibilities while going to school. This finding supports the literature, which indicates the demands of a full time job and part time studies tend to create family tensions for many females (Genzuk & Baca, 1998).

Experience as a Paraprofessional Enhances one's Prospective Teaching Career

Question six in the research study asked participants to tell how the experience they had gained as a paraprofessional/education aide helped them in the university preparation program. Six themes emerged from the participants' responses. The responses led to the conclusion that experience as a paraprofessional enhanced one's prospective teaching career. The themes that emerged from participants' responses were as follows:

- Experience as a paraprofessional helped them to better understand student needs

- Experience aided university coursework
- Experience provided valuable life experience unobtainable through university coursework/experience substitutes for student teaching
- Experience aided decision to become a teacher
- Experience aided reflection of practice to be more meaningful

These six themes confirm the studies in the literature that encourage the initiation of paraprofessional to educator preparation programs due to the wealth of student and community knowledge that paraprofessionals bring to their practice as teachers. The literature also praises paraprofessionals as a sorely needed language source for bilingual children since they bring with them a sense of how children learn, especially those students who are acquiring English as a second language (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Genzuk, 1997).

An additional reason paraprofessionals should become teachers is the fact that a large number of them desire to be teachers. In Los Angeles, 52% of the paraprofessionals surveyed for the Latino Teacher Project wanted to become teachers. This percentage rose to 75% after the paraprofessionals had spent an average of five years in the classroom (Genzuk, 1997). The initial findings of our FQEW study support the strong desire of

paraprofessionals to become teachers as our participants stated that the experience they had gained as a paraprofessional aided their decision to become a teacher. Additionally, it should be noted that 89% of potential FQEW participants (enrolled and not yet enrolled in the School of Education) indicted a moderate to high interest in becoming a teacher. Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. states that para-educator programs often bring individuals with maturity and extensive classroom experience into the professional ranks where they are likely to remain for many years (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. 1996, p.21). This is our hope of the FQEW participants.

Conclusions:

The preliminary findings indicate that the FQEW project must continue to give attention to the issue of ensuring that there are an adequate number of courses available for which students can register (evening and summer). Additionally, care must continue to be given to guarantee that students receive the appropriate amount of advising so that they do not feel lost or discouraged and are clear as to the steps needed to complete the teacher preparation program. It is critical that students feel they are making progress

toward becoming a certified teacher. Students cannot be allowed to feel like they are wasting time and as a result give up on their dream of becoming a teacher. Additionally, support must continue in the area of the student teacher waiver and allowing field based courses' observation hours to be done in their current job setting.

Furthermore, we must monitor those students that are ready to enroll in the university (level fours of our delivery model) and may be having difficulty meeting the entrance requirements of both an adequate GPA and passing the TASP at the level required by the School of Education. Research indicates that Latina(o) para-educators attempting to become teachers run into more difficulties than most teacher education candidates. (Gillis, 1991; Genzuk, 1998). This finding was confirmed in our study as FQEW participants spoke of difficulty passing the TASP reading section. English in many cases is not the native language of FQEW participants. Additionally, meeting the time requirements of the TASP test was identified as difficult by program participants. As a result of this finding, program staff must not only monitor students desiring to enter the teacher education program but also continue to provide assistance in this area and seek to support the passing of this entry level exam.

The FQEW project must continue to address the four barriers identified in the literature that if mediated for paraprofessionals no longer become barriers: academic, financial, social and external communities (Genzuk, 1994).

The academic needs of our participants are addressed through course availability, curriculum modification and advising as well as assistance with admissions test. Financial needs are addressed through our tuition and book reimbursement.

The FQEW program must examine its current efforts to provide social support and external community support to our participants. Social support can be given through the creation of a cohort structure as well as ensure that all participants are mentored by both university faculty and on-site faculty.

The FQEW project must continue to work with the external communities in which paraprofessionals reside on the problems and pressures that para educators encounter while working toward the goal of becoming credentialed teachers. Our initial efforts to garner administrative support must be continued.

Areas for Further Exploration

The FQEW project is in the initial stages of analyzing data and drawing conclusions that can lead to program improvement recommendations. Research will continue to ensure that the emerging themes are indeed themes. This will be done through triangulation with the review of documents—advisory meeting minutes, surveys, project memos, etc.., and the analysis of field observations. Additionally, further interviews will be conducted with program participants and administrators of participating districts.

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